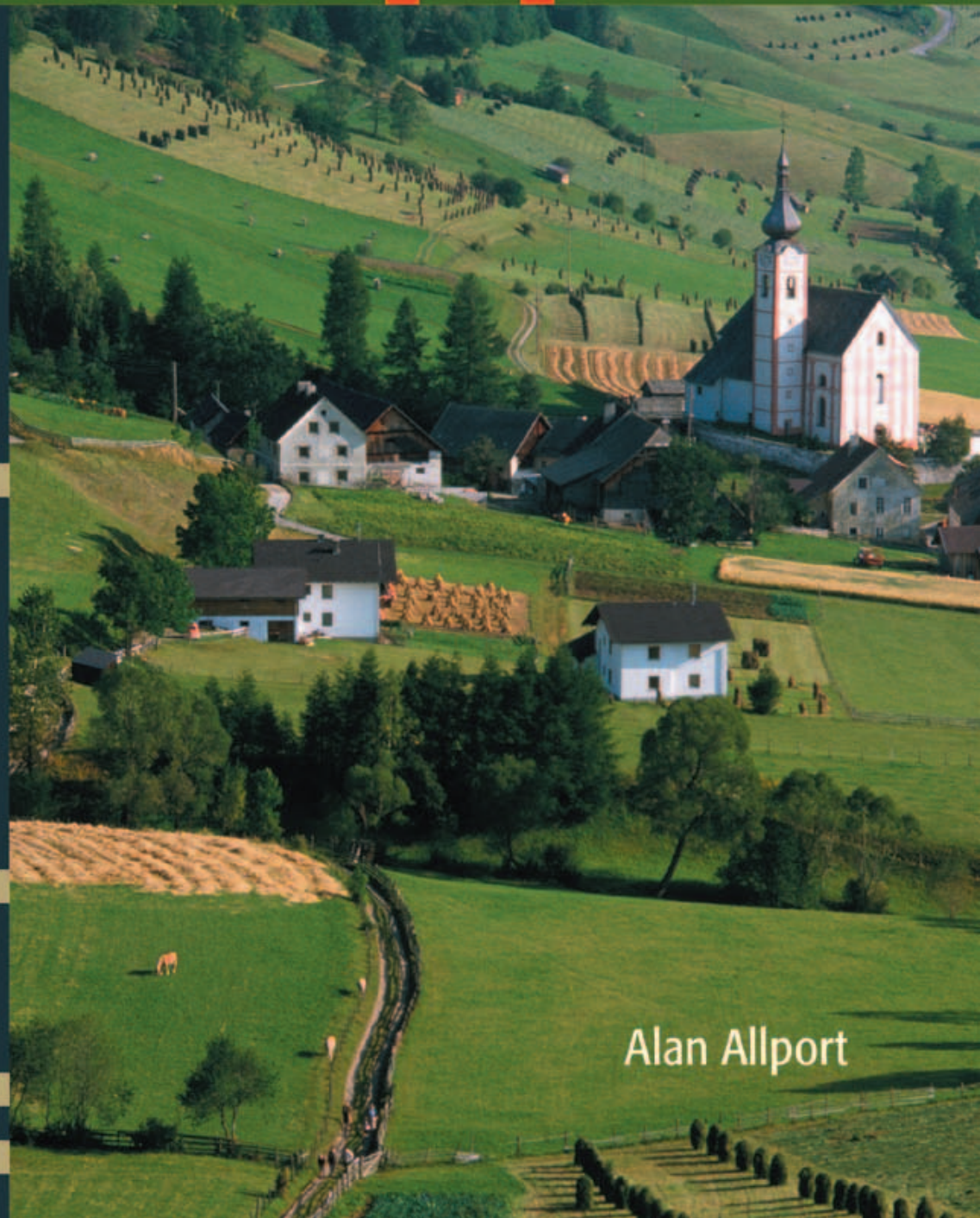




AUSTRIA



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2

The Land

“The Austrian has a fatherland, and rightly loves it,” wrote the 18th-century German playwright Friedrich Schiller. As we will see in the following chapters, Austrians have not always agreed about what the nature of that “fatherland” is. But Austria as a place is undoubtedly easy to love. It has one of the most spectacular landscapes in the world, and its enormous modern-day tourist industry is testament to the appeal of the country’s natural, as well as its man-made, environment. The very beauty of Austrian topography has ironically been more of a challenge than a boon to its history, however. Though ideal for picture postcards, Austria’s daunting terrain is much less suited to settlement and agriculture and has constricted the country’s demographic development. Austrians, like all peoples, have to some extent shaped their economic, social, and cultural ideas to

reflect the circumstances of the geography that surrounds them. One outcome of this has been a strong local identification with the varied regions from which Austrians come.

A Landscape of Beauty

Austria is a medium-sized European country in the southern-central part of the continent, surrounded by several other nations: Switzerland and the tiny duchy of Liechtenstein to the west, Germany to the northwest, the Czech Republic to the north, Slovakia to the northeast, Hungary to the east, and Slovenia and Italy to the south. At 32,378 square miles (83,859 square kilometers), Austria is roughly the size of Maine. It is a somewhat pear-shaped land, with a long, thin western end that bulges out as one travels farther eastward. The distance from west to east is approximately 340 miles (547 kilometers)—about the driving distance from New York City to Richmond, Virginia. Austria is subdivided into nine self-governing “Länder,” or federal provinces: Burgenland, Carinthia, Lower Austria, Upper Austria, Salzburg, Styria, Tyrol, Vienna, and Vorarlberg.

The single most dominant feature of the country’s landscape is its mountains. Austria is part of the great European Alpine chain, and almost two-thirds of the country is classed as mountainous. There are no huge individual peaks in Austria; the highest mountain—Grossglockner—measures in at a relatively modest 12,460 feet (3,798 meters). But there are fairly large areas of the Austrian Alps that rise above 10,000 feet (3,048 meters), and these suffer correspondingly severe weather and temperature conditions throughout the year. The most mountainous part of the country is to the west and south, and as one heads eastward, the Alps gently recede into foothills that eventually flatten out to become part of the Great Hungarian Plain at the eastern border. Despite Austria’s reputation as a land of hills, some eastern parts of the country are very flat indeed—so much so



The country map of Austria shows that its most dominant feature is its mountains, which are part of the European Alpine chain. Large areas of the Austrian Alps rise above 10,000 feet (3,048 meters) and have severe weather and temperature conditions throughout the year.

that flash floods are a serious environmental hazard during the oftentimes-stormy summer months. But it nonetheless true that for most people, both inside and outside the country, the Alps are the definitive symbol of the Austrian national landscape.

Three other natural features define much of Austrian geography. The first is the country's green blanket of forest. Even after more than a century of heavy industrialization, about two-fifths of Austria is still covered with woodland, making it the most densely forested country in central Europe, with thick belts of spruce, beech, oak, and conifers. This dense foliage provides a home to a plethora of woodland animals straight out of fairytale lore, including wolves, bears, wild boar, deer, and birds of prey. Rich

hunting opportunities encouraged generations of aristocratic sportsmen to take their summer vacations at family hunting lodges deep in the Austrian forests.

Another characteristic part of the Austrian countryside is its many lakes. These predominate in mountain and subalpine regions, particularly the beautiful Salzkammergut, a hilly central district of limestone massifs punctuated by water. The two largest lakes in Austria are at opposite ends of the country and represent the geographical extremes of its territory; Lake Constance forms a dramatic rift in the westernmost mountains of Vorarlberg, while the marshlike, salty Neusiedler See in the east is extremely shallow—only 4 to 6 feet (1.2 to 1.8 meters) deep at most—and almost disappears during hot summers.

The last significant feature of Austrian geography, and the only serious competitor with the Alps as the defining icon of the country's natural heritage, is the Danube. One of the great river systems of the world, coursing for 1,770 miles (2,849 kilometers) from the Black Forest in western Germany to the Black Sea, the Danube, in addition to providing the inspiration for some of Austria's most enduring artistic works, gives the northeast corner of Austria—through which it flows for 220 miles (350 kilometers)—a vital commercial and agricultural base. Always one of Austria's lifelines to the outside world, the Danube's usefulness as a channel of trade has been increased even more by the opening in 1992 of a canal linking it to the Rhine and the Main, allowing river traffic to travel directly from the North Sea to the Black Sea and beyond. Indeed, the Danube is so critical to the countries that border it that its pollution has become a serious international controversy in recent years.

Austria's climate is an eccentric one, reflecting its central position on the European mainland. The Austrian Alps are a meeting point for weather patterns originally emanating from the North Atlantic, the Mediterranean, and the



Another outstanding feature of Austria's geography is the Danube River, which stretches over 1,700 miles from Germany to the Black Sea. In this stunning view, we see the ruins of an ancient castle, perched high above the river valley.

Ukrainian steppe, and the combination of these can produce unstable and occasionally bizarre quirks of temperature and precipitation. Although the country below the mountainous snow zone is generally temperate, eastern Austria in the summer is often alternately basted with hot dry winds from southern Russia and lashed by violent rainstorms. Farther west, the Salzburg region is home to the peculiar phenomenon known as *Schnürlregen*, a type of rain that comes down not in drops but in continuous ribbonlike streams. And moody Austrians, especially in the Tyrol, have always blamed their state of mind on the so-called *Föhn*, a warm and moist air mass from the south that it is sometimes claimed induces depression and even suicide. But despite these idiosyncratic touches, Austria has a reasonably consistent seasonal cycle that does not place great handicaps in the way of farmers.

However, what do create handicaps for farmers—or, for that matter, any kind of dense population growth—are the selfsame geographical features that combine to make Austria a place of unsurpassed beauty: the poor and uneven quality of the land caused by the mountainous terrain and the interspersed woods and lakes. Less than one-fifth of Austria's soil is really suitable for conventional agriculture. Much of the grassland is at a high altitude, which is used as pasture for dairy cattle during the summer months but is not appropriate for growing cereal crops or animal fodder. The best farming land is predominantly to the north and east, in Upper and Lower Austria, Burgenland, and parts of Styria, and not surprisingly these areas have been the focus of human settlement throughout most of Austria's history. The scarcity of useful food-producing land, plus its geographical imbalance, is reflected in the fact that Austria has a very low population density compared to other rich European countries—closer to that of the Balkans than the industrialized West—and the majority of Austrians (over

two-thirds) live in the more sustainable Danubian region beyond the Alps. In the mountainous western region the population is mostly restricted to small river valleys, which until recent advances in communication were largely cut off from one another. Nearly all Austrians live in just two-fifths of the country's territory; the remaining area supports a very low and widely scattered population.

But despite these formidable natural obstacles Austria has historically been a major conduit for people, goods and information, a European crossroads that connects west to east and north to south. The narrow 4,511-foot-high (1,375 meters) Brenner Pass is the most important land link between southern Germany and Italy's Po River Valley, a route for invading armies used by the Romans onward and a channel of trade from the Mediterranean to the Baltic and North Seas since late medieval times. And as we have already noted, the River Danube is the principal commercial artery between western and southeastern Europe. The river's strategic significance is highlighted by the string of castles and fortifications that bedeck its banks, and Austria's control of a couple of hundred of those miles has long afforded it a military and political significance that has not always been in its best interest. Turkish ambitions in Europe from the 15th century on, for example, depended on a secure line of communications back to their imperial capital at Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul), and this meant advancing along the Danube; for hundreds of years Austria had to act as Europe's frontier guard against the onslaught of the Ottoman invaders. There has also been a corresponding traffic of people from west to east, with merchants, pilgrims, and crusaders journeying to the cities and shrines of the Near East and the Holy Land. Nowadays the old pilgrim routes have been supplanted by a dense interstate (*Autobahn*) road network that acts as a transportation hub for European commerce.

Austria can be subdivided into three major geographical regions: the western Alpine region of Vorarlberg, Tyrol, Salzburg and Carinthia; the central foothill region of Styria and Upper Austria; and the eastern predominantly flatter plains region of Lower Austria and Burgenland. It is important to keep in mind that these subdivisions are somewhat arbitrary—all of Austria's provinces contain some hills and mountains, for example—but however imperfectly, they do represent a real shift in the topographical character of the country.

The Alpine West

The Austrian Alps consist of three major groups, northern, central, and southern. The northern and southern mountain chains are limestone, while the central peaks are made up of softer crystalline rocks. Glaciers have cut dramatic clefts in the mountain faces and formed lush valleys in which the majority of settlements are clustered. The isolated circumstances of this life have been reflected in a rugged individualist ethos within the local communities, which have a long history of political independence from Vienna.

Vorarlberg is the smallest (excepting the capital itself) and most westerly of all Austria's provinces, and before the construction of the Arlberg tunnel in 1978, it was effectively cut off from the rest of the country during winter. Despite its rustic nature and inhospitable terrain, it is one of the most heavily industrialized regions of Austria and has an ancient textile and dairy-farming industry; its largest city, Dornbirn, is an important manufacturing center. Culturally close to their Swiss neighbors, the citizens of Vorarlberg attempted to secede to Switzerland after the breakup of the Habsburg Empire. The locals have now accommodated themselves to life as Austrians, perhaps encouraged by the fact that they possess the highest income per head in the country.

Tyrol lies at the heart of the Austrian Alps, and one of its more dubious claims is that it has the lowest percentage of

useable arable land (3 percent) of any national province; barely 15 percent of Tyrol is permanently settled. Boasting daunting mountain peaks, its capital, Innsbruck, is a major winter-sports destination and has hosted two Winter Olympics, which has helped to give Tyrol the highest earnings from tourism of all Austria's provinces. The medieval silver mines that once enriched the local nobility were exhausted by the 17th century, and aside from tourism the region's most significant economic activity is cattle and dairy farming. Tyrolean patriots are famous for waging an effective guerilla war against Napoleon Bonaparte in the early 1800s, but the province was less fortunate a century later when it was carved in two by the Treaty of St. Germain, which awarded South Tyrol to Italy.

Salzburg, a province that shares its name with its principal city, was an independent bishopric outside of Austria until 1816. The city built its gorgeous Baroque churches with the taxes acquired from mining deposits of gold, silver, and salt—for which the region is named—deposits, and salt production is still an important factor in the local economy; but nowadays Salzburger prefer to mine the rich reputation of their most famous son, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Salzburg also includes the Krimml Falls, the largest waterfalls in Europe.

Carinthia is the southernmost of Austria's provinces, and its position south of the major Alpine groups means that it enjoys a warmer, more consistent summer temperature than the rest of the country. Carinthia is home to over 2,000 lakes, including four very large bodies of water, and the Riviera-like climate has particular appeal for tourists from elsewhere in Austria. Carinthia's timber industry is especially important for the regional economy. The province borders Slovenia, formerly part of Yugoslavia, and has a small Slovenian ethnic minority. Parts of Carinthia were claimed by the Yugoslavs after both World Wars, and there were violent clashes across the frontier.



Perhaps best known as the birthplace of composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Salzburg is a culturally rich city that built its fortunes from rich mining deposits in the area. Overlooked by dramatic mountains and an eleventh-century fortress, the city is home to some of the region's most beautiful churches.

The Central Foothills

The most notable feature of this region is the Salzkammergut, an area of forested crags and lakes that has a good claim to be the loveliest of all Austria's scenic landscapes and has enjoyed a flourishing tourist industry since at least the 19th century. More suitable for agriculture and with less treacherous communications than the west, central Austria is consequently more populous and has a high industrial concentration in its large cities.

Styria ("Steiermark" in German) is known as the Green Province because of its thick forests, which cover over half the countryside. Woodland is interspersed with pastures and vineyards that produce part of Austria's growing wine export trade. Heavy mining operations take place in Styria, which includes the well-known Erzberg, or Iron Mountain; the largest provincial city, Graz—Austria's second city after Vienna and long its political and cultural rival—is also heavily industrialized. The decline in world demand for heavy industrial goods depressed the local economy in the last few decades, but a switch to service industries has aided recovery—as have the frequent visits of Graz's celebrated son Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Upper Austria makes up one-quarter of the country's industrial output, and though the province's major city, Linz, is smaller than Graz, Linz's position on the Danube gives it particular commercial importance. Upper Austria is also a center of agriculture, and there are significant oil and natural-gas fields located there. Like all of Austria's provinces, it contains some magnificent scenery, with granite hills surrounded by meadows and woods. There are several well-preserved medieval towns, including Braunau, which has the uncomfortable distinction of being Adolf Hitler's childhood home.

The Eastern Plains

Although “plains” is something of a misnomer because Lower Austria and Burgenland contain their share of high ground as well, the provinces at the eastward extreme of Austria are the flattest in the country and correspondingly among the most hospitable to human settlement.

Lower Austria surrounds the city of Vienna, which administratively is a federal province in its own right, though the two obviously share a common historical and geographical heritage. Lower Austria is the largest of the nine provinces and the Austrian political heartland—the original source of the name “Austria” and the basis of the Eastern March, from which the country derives its origins. As well as its important farming base, the area is also Austria’s biggest wine producer. The so-called Vienna Woods—an area of gently rolling hillsides, small farms, and forests close to the metropolis—mark the division between city and countryside.

Vienna itself has sometimes been described as a capital without an empire, a great city that became one of the artistic centers of European culture in its 19th-century heyday and that now sits rather awkwardly within a small and parochial country. With one-fifth of all Austrians being Viennese, the city naturally plays a key role in the life of the nation—a role that is sometimes resented by those in the far-flung provinces.

Burgenland has a natural and man-made heritage quite unlike any other region of Austria. Until the creation of the First Republic, Burgenland was part of Hungary; geographically it is the westernmost extreme of the Puszta, or Great Hungarian Plain, and so is closer in landscape to eastern than central Europe. Market gardening of fruit and vegetables is an important local industry, as is the area’s distinctive wine from its vineyards. The Hungarian flavor is maintained by

such local tourist attractions as the huge and opulent Esterházy Palace, home of one of Hungary's great aristocratic families, and the one-time workplace of the composer Franz Joseph Haydn.

Ecological Issues

Throughout this chapter we have seen that two factors, above all, have influenced Austria's development: its marginal land resources and its centrality in Europe's transport and communications system. In recent years the combination of these two has given rise to serious environmental problems, for the huge increases in Europe's economic activity—especially since the end of the Cold War and the rebuilding of the former Eastern Bloc—have put great stress on the inherently fragile Austrian ecosystem. Austrians have responded to this threat with strong political pressure for “green”—i.e., environmentally friendly—policies.

About one-quarter of all the traffic using Austria's Autobahn system is made up of large commercial trucks hauling goods across the Continent. The routes they take wind through the mountainous western provinces—areas that are particularly vulnerable to environmental damage from noise and exhaust pollution. The trans-European weather patterns that meet in the Austrian Alps also import polluted air from northwest Europe, Italy, and the former communist countries of Eastern Europe; the latter source is especially worrisome for Austrians because many of these countries have lax or nonexistent pollution-control laws. By the early 1990s it was estimated that about four-tenths of Austria's vast forests had been damaged by acid rain generated from the country's own industrial plants as well as that which comes in from abroad. Depletion of woodland in mountain areas has caused other environmental hazards; as the treeline that naturally soaks up snow and rain disappears, Alpine provinces have suffered greater incidences of

mudslides, flash floods, and avalanches. Austria's success at attracting tourists has proved a mixed blessing, for the huge numbers of incoming visitors during the vacation season have overloaded the modest infrastructures of the remote western provinces.

Aiming to counter these threats to their delicate ecological balance, Austria's government and people have tried to introduce domestic legislation reducing environmental damage as well as negotiate international agreements to limit problems emanating from abroad. Vienna is engaged in discussions with the European Union (EU) to restrict the amount of commercial traffic that can enter the country at any one time and encourage the greater use of railroads for goods transit. Similar initiatives to clean up fossil-fuel power stations, one of the principal sources of acid rain, are under way. Austrians are fastidious about recycling, and the country is the third largest recycler of paper in the world. Advertising campaigns to propagate the idea of so-called green tourism, which has a less destructive effect on the natural environment, have begun. Austria was also the first country in Europe to formally ban—by popular referendum—the use of atomic energy within its own borders, although critics have pointed out that the country turns a blind eye to importing nuclear-generated power from neighboring sources. A small but growing parliamentary Green Party now pushes for more stringent environmental legislation in Vienna.

It can be seen from all this that Austria's environmental problems are, above all, international problems, and that they can only be effectively tackled by cooperation from all the countries of the region. The fate of the River Danube is perhaps the best example of this. Nine countries share the Danube, and all of them exploit its transport, hydroelectric, fishing, irrigation, and water-supply potential. As use of the river has increased—particularly in the developing east—its

resources have correspondingly suffered; the Danube's waters are no longer safely drinkable because of the industrial toxicants pumped into it from chemical and manufacturing plants, its fishing grounds have been depleted, and the addition of new canals and dams has influenced the river's course and flow in a perilously unpredictable way. No single country can legislate a cleanup of the Danube in isolation because all the members of the Danubian community are equally responsible for its preservation.

Issues like the Danube's pollution have played an important role in Austria's sometimes-fractured relationship with the European Union. Critics of EU expansion insist that the Union must not allow former Eastern Bloc countries to become members unless they provide adequate environmental safeguards for their industry. EU supporters have suggested that it's only the support and discipline of the Union that will encourage the East to do this in the first place.



Habsburg ruler, Franz Joseph (1830-1916) guided Austria out of an era of revolutionary turmoil she suffered during the mid-1800s. To answer pressure from his Hungarian subjects, Franz Joseph issued the Compromise of 1867, creating what would be known as the Austro-Hungarian Empire.